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PARENT-LEVEL ANSWERS--READING IN THE PTA STUDY PROGRAM.'

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PARENTS OFTEN ASK HOW THEIR CHILDREN ARE BEING TAUGHT TO READ AND WHY READING IS TAUGHT AS IT IS. THIS PAPER REPORTS HOW SOME PTA STUDY SESSIONS IN DALLAS, TEXAS, GAVE PARENT-LEVEL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON READING INSTRUCTION WHILE DEVELOPING POSITIVE PARENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS. A SERIES OF PTA SCHOOL-STUDY EVENINGS CONSISTING OF 45-MINUTE SESSIONS DURING WHICH PARENTS, POSING AS PUPILS, LEARNED HOW TEACHERS DIRECT READING ACTIVITIES. THESE SESSIONS WERE EXTENDED TO OTHER AREAS OF THE CURRICULUM TO MAKE PARENTS AWARE OF THE BREADTH OF DEVELOPMENTAL LEARNING AND THE RANGE OF CHILDREN'S BOOKS AND OTHER READING RESOURCES. ANOTHER PTA INSERVICE SESSION ATTEMPTED TO ANSWER PARENTS' QUESTIONS ABOUT CHILDREN'S BOOKS THROUGH A BOOK FAIR. OTHER WAYS OF INFORMING PARENTS ABOUT READING INSTRUCTION ARE SELF-LEARNING EXPERIENCES, EVENING CLASSES FOR ADULT NONREADERS, LIBRARY PROJECTS, GROUP SESSIONS WITH PARENTS OF CHILDREN WITH READING PROBLEMS, OBSERVATION OF CLASSES, AND TELEVISED PROGRAMS FOR THOSE UNABLE TO ATTEND THE STUDY SESSIONS. SEVERAL BOOKS ARE CITED WHICH PROVIDE ANSWERS TO PARENTS' QUESTIONS ON READING INSTRUCTION. THIS PAPER WAS PRESENTED AT THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH CONFERENCE (HONOLULU, NOVEMBER 23-25, 1967). (NS)

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PARENT-LEVEL ANSWERS: READING IN THE PTA STUDY PROGRAM

A parent who wrote an article for the October 1956 issue of The Reading Teacher gave me the title for this talk.[1] For seven years this mother who was actively interested in her child's reading wondered what was really going on. At times she was happy with the child's reading progress; at times she was annoyed and defensive and puzzled about what teaching she should try to do at home. When her daughter was completing the sixth grade, the mother, through a parent-teacher in-service session, understood for the first time the seven years of work that had gone on. A teacher's explanation combined with a school-made film presented classroom scenes of the actual teaching of reading from kindergarten through grade six. This experience gave her the parent-level answers she had been seeking.

Children's reading is a source of delight and of worry for parents. Many of them feel that reading is the basis of understanding people and ideas and place high value on their children's satisfying reading progress. If satisfying progress does not mean the same thing to the parent and the teacher, there is special need of communication and understanding to help the child enjoy learning to read.

Parents are reading the constant flow of popular magazine and newspaper articles on reading, often written by people who have a gift of words but lack an understanding of how children learn. Fortunately more and more are asking questions and one of the effective ways we have of answering is through PTA study sessions. Here parents and teachers have experiences in listening, seeing, and talking. Sessions are planned so that parents can understand not only how their children are being taught to read but

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why reading is taught as it is. Most of the time they do not see reading taught as they remember learning to read.

One of the popular kinds of in-service sessions I have observed in Dallas, Texas, is a series of school study evenings sponsored by the PTA Study Committee and the school faculty. Both parents come and spend 45 minutes or an hour sitting at or near Johnnie or Susie's desk; the teacher gives them the same reading experiences that she had with Johnnie or Susie that day. Here the teacher is putting to use the classroom resources she has as well as giving the parents opportunity to see her own personal way of directing reading activities. When these sessions begin, teachers are interested in the parents' expressed surprise that all of the children are not reading from the same book; they may not even be following the same pattern of study or practice problems. A few are nonplused that they are not asked to read "in turn". A lively discussion with parent-level answers usually develops from a learning session like this.

As the study evenings continue through social studies, science, mathematics, and library activities, parents begin to understand the breadth of developmental learning. They become more aware of the range of children's books and other resources for infomational and leisure reading.

Another in-service session, which has had yearly repeat performances, was set up to answer parent questions about what books do we get from the library or - with encouragement - what books do we buy. A Book Fair, again planned by the PTA committee and school staff, proved an exciting answer. At school, children had long enough to browse among the new books that they began to spot favorites. When the day or the evening came for parents to attend the Fair, many were already instructed to look at certain books. A parent or teacher or librarian, selected for enthusiasm and

wisdom, gave a brief introductory talk to explain the range and placement of the books in the Fair. Then parents were turned loose with a cup of coffee to browse. In each section a class-elected pupil host and hostess book enthusiast beamed on the grown-ups, and if encouraged, talked with them about the books. At the PTA table, orders for books could be given. Following the Fair, teachers thought they heard more happy references to books for Christmas and birthday presents than heretofore. Hopefully many families were having fun sharing book talk.

One of the most delightful Book Fairs was in a less affluent neighborhood where books were not a part of family life. The principal, librarian, teachers, and a small number of interested parents who were both the PTA executive and study committee worked to set up a paperback Book Fair. They enjoyed selecting the books and learning the extensiveness of paperbacks available. One of their most used resources was the paperback edition of Nancy Larrick's A Parent's Guide to Children's Reading, which offered them both criteria for making selections and annotations of a wide variety of children's books.[2] Among the many sources for paperbacks they found one, Scholastic Book Services, which had hundreds of paperbacks ranging from kindergarten interests to those of teen-agers.[3]

The introduction for this Book Fair session was a short period in which children dramatized bits of popular stories. Once again parents browsed with coffeecup in hand. Once again some parents had been alerted by their children as to which books were special favorites. Paperbacks began to move into homes that had no books. One child proudly reported that he and his daddy had built him a bookcase for his four new paperbacks.

Involving parents in self-learning experiences is another kind of PTA study program. For preschool and first year parent sessions, Paul

McKee's A Primer for Parents has proved both interesting and enlightening.[4] In using this primer, parents put themselves in the situation of a first grader learning to read. Through systematic codebreaking, they practice using letter forms, beginning sounds, and context clues to get meaning from their reading. As they unlock the code, they gain some understanding about how their child is learning to read and get some insight about complexities in learning.

Parent self-learning can be wide ranging. When a number of speed reading businesses moved into Dallas, parents began to wonder about the advertisements that guaranteed reading 10,000 or 20,000 words plus a minute so that one could get his reading done quickly and move on, apparently, to something he enjoyed. They asked questions about improving reading rate. Working with the school principals, some PTA Study Committees planned a course for improving reading efficiency for parents. They used Ruth Strang's Study Type of Reading Exercises, College Level as a base text[5] and the Nelson-Denny Reading Tests[6] for their pre- and post-measuring instruments. Selected English and reading teachers, in a team approach, taught sessions in which they had special strengths, as vocabulary, paragraph patterns, skimming, and reading in different fields of study. Those who stayed with the six weekly sessions were pleased with their progress although they were not meeting the guarantees of the speed reading advertisements. Even those who came and studied intermittently expressed interest in receiving parent-level answers that helped them understand how personal involvement and ability affect efficiency in reading.

A somewhat related experience in reading may offer a source for exploring parent study in reading sessions. Principals who, through federal funds, established evening classes for adults who could not read or who

read very inadequately reported a valuable bonus in this kind of program. As parents worked on their own reading, they showed more interest in their children's school experiences and talked more freely about the children and their problems.

In An Adventure in Human Relations Muriel Crosby relates many experiences of principals and teachers who, realizing that a total family approach is needed to develop a living language for speaking, reading, and writing, planned enrichment sessions for parents.[7] Library projects and programs had as their objectives helping parents learn how to have fun with books. Trips to theaters and other places of interest were organized for both parents and children. These were only two of many ways that offered families experiences in living their language. Dr. Crosby's book develops many ideas that may offer suggestions to school and PTA in a community whose parents are unaware of their important role in their children's learning and do not know that they are unaware.

A special kind of in-service session to help parents who have children with reading problems is another area for exploration. Janice Studholme reported that parents with children who were receiving special reading aid met in a group sessions with a guidance counselor.[8] As the mothers responded to the sessions, their attitudes toward their children became more relaxed, and the children seemed to develop more positive attitudes about themselves and their reading. Dr. Studholme's experience indicates group sessions with mothers of retarded readers is a remedial technique which needs further study.

In the more general kind of study sessions with panel discussions, dialogues, or a single speaker, the opportunity to see children in action can clarify talking or explaining. Live demonstrations are not always

feasible. Taping class activities is perhaps one of the least expensive and most easily prepared kinds of demonstration. As a teacher explains what and how she is teaching, she can illustrate from the taped record of children's responses in the classroom. A taped sequence of developmental skill learnings from kindergarten through senior high school could offer interesting parent-level answers to what kind of reading experiences are my children having. Some schools are filming classroom activities which help in the parent study program. For schools that are not ready to prepare films, there are excellent ones available for borrowing. Skippy and the Three R's, Gregory Learns To Read, They All Learn To Read, and Learning To Read are a few which offer opportunity for parent learning. State Departments of Education will have information about these and newer films that are being produced. Television offers an opportunity to reach parents who are unable to attend live in-service sessions. Planned by both parent and school leaders, these sessions can reach a wide audience. Local television stations are usually glad to work with the planners as one of their public service contributions.

A.Sterl Artley reminds us that perhaps the questions parents never ask are the ones we need most to answer.[9] In Helping Your Child Improve His Reading, Ruth Strang offers a possible guide for parent study sessions when there is a need to activate questions.[10] Dr. Strang makes clear the relation among home and school and reading. She sets up a starter shelf of questions and answers, from both the parent and the child's point of view, that could launch a series of in-service discussions for people trying to articulate their misunderstandings and misgivings. For parent and school leaders, the book offers a bibliography of inexpensive resources

on reading, written primarily for patents. It also has an extensive annotated bibliography of children's reading material.

In his book Child Development Willard Olson emphasizes the responsibility of the school to interpret the school program to the parents.[11] This interpretation may serve to reduce quick acceptance of propaganda, to help parents to gain understandings that, in turn, help children learn better, and to have data to aid other adults in understanding. Dr. Olson thinks of parents as stockholders to whom the schools owe clear, meaningful reports.

We have been reviewing here a few of the kinds of in-service or study sessions that have offered ways of presenting "stockholder" reports while developing positive and pleasant parent-teacher relations. The greatest strength is in having parents involved in the planning. They are in a position to have a grass roots awareness of community interests and needs. Parent-teacher study sessions as an opportunity to encourage parent-level questions and as a challenge to find parent-level answers are limited only by our own creative thinking and planning.

Parent-level Answers

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